AMERICA - LOVE IT RIGHT
Luke 9:51-53
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> When the days drew near for him to be received up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make ready for him; but the people would not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. **Luke 9:51-53**

Why do you suppose the people of that village were unwilling to help Jesus get to Jerusalem? The classic answer is that it was a Samaritan village and Samaritans didn't recognize the authority of Jerusalem and its temple. They didn't help because they thought he was going to the wrong city for the wrong reason. That's the classic answer. I've always thought, however, at least part of the reason was that the people of the village smelled trouble - real trouble - ahead. It was that "setting his face to go to Jerusalem" business. It was precisely the purposefulness. He meant it. He was going to the economic and political center of the nation; the place where religion, culture, politics, justice were housed and practiced. It wasn't simply the next city on the itinerary: it was THE city, to which one never goes simply by accident. The people of the village sensed that and wanted nothing to do with it.

You can almost hear his friends protesting: "Why Jerusalem, Jesus? Why take a chance? What can you accomplish or experience in the city which you can't accomplish or experience in Galilee? They followed him, of course, but with a degree of amazement, bordering on terror.

The decision to go to Jerusalem was perhaps the most important decision Jesus ever made. The Gospel writers know that and, accordingly, devote a full one half of the narrative to the events which took place during the one week he was in the city. In terms of his ministry, the decision to go to Jerusalem was the turning point. It ended up costing him his life.

The decision is important philosophically as well, because it forever defines the locus of the Gospel as the world. It forever signifies that following Jesus is a very worldly activity: that in tension with personal piety, there must always be the public declaration, the confrontation with the city. The fact that Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem" means that there is counterpoint in our discipleship; that following Jesus will mean singing hymns and praying, and also saddling up to go to the State House, the Congress, the court room.

Jesus did not go in order to run for office. The acquisition of political power had no appeal to him whatever. When it was offered to him, he declined it. In point of fact, whenever religious institutions, and particularly religious zealots, end up actually having political power, the human race is in for a lot of trouble - witness, for instance, the Inquisition or the Ayatollah. But to suggest that Jesus was apolitical: that religion and politics, religion and economics, religion and justice don't mix, based on his life is, at best naive, and at worst, self serving. He went to Jerusalem because it was the Capital: the political, economic and religions soul of his people. He went precisely to confront the systems: to make his claim on the souls of human beings in the very place where other institutions make that claim. What happened there was not an accident of time and place; it was the result of his intentionality. What transpired was the highest and holiest traditions of God's people.

The account evokes powerful images out of the past, primarily that marvelous creation story in Genesis 2 which we heard earlier. God fashions a man out of the dust of the earth, like a potter, an artist, and breathes his own breath into the man and the man lives. The breath - which can be translated "spirit" or wind which hovered over the formless void before creation; the divine energy which exists before anything else exists.

Jesus, in this incident in John's Gospel, breathes on his disicples and gives them new life just as God animated the lifeless human form he had constructed out of dust. Jesus gives them his spirit, his life, in the act John calls, breathing on them.

God, the Bible seems to be saying, is something like that mysterious and powerful breath. The late Paul Tillich was enormously helpful in teaching that God may be described as "the ground of being": the very essence of life itself. One of the major hurdles for modern American Christians is a very basic Biblical way of talking about God. God, in the Bible, is not a passive idea, or a concept, or a proposition, but a power, a dynamic energy seething with potentiality and promise. God, in the Bible, is not thought about so much as experienced - in the Bible the question "What is God like" is answered by telling what God does. "Who is God?" We start out answering that question like this - "God is a supreme being, infinite, all powerful, omnipotent." The Old Testament, on the other hand, answers the question "Who is God?" like this: "God is the one who brought us out of Egypt." The word "God" in the Bible points, not to a philosophic thesis, but to the power which is behind and in and through all life. God, I would propose, is that which distinguishes life from death. God is life, energy: the force that turns the primal chaos into order: the power that takes the shapelessness of the void and fills it with mountains and galaxies and oceans teaming with living things. God is that mysterious force which shows itself in the astounding fact that single-cell amoebas actually live; the mysterious vitality in gorillas and sharks and whippoorwills and Homo Sapiens. In the Bible God is the force which makes us hunger for and need one another and in the hungering and needing assures that we will celebrate the goodness of life and guarantee its continuation. This God who lived so fully in Jesus is the very breath of life.

There are important implications here. The first is that God is that which gives life to everything that lives. As basic as that sounds, the unfortunate truth is that Christian people have often been persuaded to act as if life were a cosmic mistake, an accident that slipped in the back door of the world as it were. It has its origins in Greek dualism apparently which held that tangible, created matter, was hopelessly despoiled, dirty, and evil; that holiness is a product of avoiding getting one's hands dirty in life. What the Christian Church has always been tempted to do is take the idea of the Spirit - the breath of God - and turn it into some ethereal, other worldly idiom. But it means life. God's spirit is what makes life - life. Rather than denying it, avoiding it, cloistering our religious rituals away from it, we people of faith are called to affirm it, to be in it, to love it and enjoy it for all we are worth.

One who helps me do that is Lewis Thomas, Director of the Sloane Kettering Cancer Clinic, columnist for New England Journal of Medicine and author. In The Medusa and the Snail he writes about the public reaction to the much publicized "test-tube babies."

That, however, is not the way the current is running these days. Critics of the culture observe something called "the New Narcissism" which elevates self-gratification to the level once occupied by public service. And even if you believe that Adam Smith's free market economic theories are inspired by God, it ought at least to be occasionally noted that their philosophic foundation is self-interest. Smith himself, whose ideas originally expressed a vision of eradicating poverty in the London slums, worried that an economic system based on individualism and selfishness would ultimately end up celebrating greed and putting an end to any commitment to the larger community.

That is the moral issue: the theological issue, if you will: not who should provide the day-care centers and hot lunches for the poor - the public or private sector. The moral issue is that when the public sector closes down, the private sector does not simply take up the slack, because it doesn't want to.

Adam Smith was right. People are selfish. But, as Christians we have been schooled theologically to call that sin. We have also been given a glimpse of humanity which suggests that on occasion we do rise above that. We are not purely greedy. Last week a Kansas City Chief's football player drowned trying to save the lives of two young boys. Intrusions of common decency suggest that old Adam Smith really didn't know the whole truth and that a system predicated on self interest encourages not the highest in us, but perhaps something significantly lower.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn sees it. Banned from his native Russia, implacable foe of Marxism/Leninism, Solzhenitsyn was asked recently what he thought the main moral ill of the West was. He answered immediately: "Selfishness. We hear a constant clamor for rights, rights, always rights, but so little about responsibility ...The need now is for selflessness, a spirit of sacrifice, for a willingness to put aside personal gains for the salvation of the whole Western world." (WSJ, 6/23/83)

He said that, by the way, not in some left wing periodical but on the editorial page of the Wall Street Journal last week, and as if on cue, a letter to the editor responded that nobody pays attention to Solzhenitsyn because selflessness and putting the common good before one's individual needs is contrary to our right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness: that community first is socialism.

The faith, I believe, has something to contribute at this point. We have more to offer than the prayer at the beginning of the meeting. We know a secret that no one else seems to know, and it is that the best happiness is not the satisfaction of all one's needs, but the pursuit of the common good. We know a secret and that is that Adam Smith was wrong: that a life devoted to self interest remains empty, spiritually bankrupt.

Our contribution is a vision upon which Western civilization may depend for its life. Dr. John Raines, Temple University, commented recently, "The recovery of our nation's soul waits for the church to recover the moral vision of the commonwealth." And long ago, standing on the foredeck of a ship making for Massachusetts Bay in 1630, John Winthrop told those brave souls that the only way to avoid tragedy and disaster was to "abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities...and always having before our eyes our community..." (R. Bellah, The Broken Covenant, p. 14)

What makes all of this more than a flight of theological fancy is the fact that it has to do with our deepest yearnings, our most urgent needs. Herbert Benson, physician and professor on the faculty of Harvard Medical School, in a widely read book, The Relaxation Response, points out that deep breathing is the oldest, most universally acknowledged spiritual discipline. Ancient people, mostly in Eastern cultures, knew that to breathe consciously, to reflect on the physical action of breathing, to feel the inhalation and exhalation, was to be in touch with the essence of something too profound for words. It was to know life -aliveness - in an acute way. So, breathing techniques are part of meditation and prayer disciplines in many of the world religions. Benson suggests, that jogging is good, if only because it forces deep breathing - which we ought to be doing anyway. We know, intuitively, that is to say, that there is more to breath than a little whisp of air. We know, I believe, what it means when stress and worry and fear constrict that apparatus. We know, without being told that a symptom of deep anxiety is the inability to take a full breath and that somehow our very spirit is involved in that situation.

One of my favorite authors writes that "Sighs are tears not yet released into the world" and that "The sound of my own breathing is evidence of God's present invigoration of my life." (Robert Raines, The Faithing Oak)

We know, I think, what it means to be breathless: to be depleted spiritually. Busy, hard working people know all too well what it means to spend everythinig - physically, emotionally and spiritually - for vocation, family, community, church. A very wise pastor friend of mine used to say to clergy, or anyone who would listen, that there is a ten to twenty year period in the middle of life when most of us are giving out more than we are taking in: to marriage, to children, to community responsibility, to profession. It is a period of spiritual deficient spending, and the price we pay for it is very, very high in terms of stress, alcoholism, heart attacks, and a bundle of personal and relational problems. Most of us, my guess is, know about spiritual deficits.

Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." The Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news. It is the promise that when we have emptied ourselves, when we have given everything we have to give, God the life-giver, God the Spirit who is life itself, will restore and heal and refill and renew and recreate us by breathing again breath of life into us.

No where is that said with more gentleness and beauty than a lovely Appalachian hymn:

The lone, wild bird in lofty flight
Is still with thee, nor leaves thy sight.
And I am thine! I rest in thee.
Great Spirit, come, and rest in me. Amen.